Timeline of H.D. Thoreau’s Life

Jul 12, 1817

Henry David Thoreau Born

Parents John and Cynthia Thoreau have a baby boy they name David Henry (he decides to switch the names later). He is the third of the couple's four children.

1818

Thoreaus Leave Concord

The family moves to Chelmsford, about ten miles away from Concord, so that John Thoreau can open a grocery store. When it closes three years later, the family moves to Boston and John Thoreau teaches school.

1823

Return to Concord

The family moves back to Concord and John takes over his brother-in-law's pencil factory. Henry David Thoreau works at the factory throughout his life.

1828

Concord Academy

David Henry and John Jr. Thoreau enroll at Concord Academy, a progressive college prep school in town.

1833

Harvard

With family chipping in to pay his tuition, Thoreau begins studies at Harvard. A voracious student, he takes far more than the required number of courses.

Aug 31, 1837

The American Scholar

Shortly after Thoreau's graduation from Harvard, Ralph Waldo Emerson gives his lecture "The American Scholar" to a crowded house at Harvard. Thoreau is in the audience and is profoundly moved by the talk. He introduces himself to Emerson and the two become good friends. Thoreau joins the Transcendental Club, an informal gathering of progressive thinkers that meets sporadically at Emerson's house. He also changes his name to Henry David.

1838

Takes Over Old School

Thoreau takes over leadership of the Concord Academy. His brother John soon joins him there as a teacher. Louisa May Alcott is one of their students.

1840

*The Dial*

The transcendentalist journal *The Dial* is founded. Thoreau becomes an avid contributor to the journal, publishing poems, essays and translations.

1841

Moves in With Emersons

Thoreau moves into Ralph Waldo Emerson's home, earning his board by doing handyman jobs around the house and babysitting the Emerson children.

Jan 1842

Brother Dies

John Thoreau Jr. dies in his brother's arms from tetanus he contracted from a shaving cut that became infected. A grieving Thoreau closes Concord Academy.

Jul 4, 1845

On Walden Pond

Thoreau moves into a cabin he built himself on Emerson's property on Walden Pond. He lives there for the next two years and two months. While living there he begins his memoir of the experience, *Walden*.

1847

Leaves the Pond

Thoreau moves out of his cabin and into Emerson's home to care for his children while Emerson is lecturing.

Jul 1848

Jailed

Thoreau spends a night in jail after refusing to pay his poll tax. The refusal was an act of protest against the American government's policies on slavery and the Mexican-American War.

May 1849

"Civil Disobedience"

Thoreau's essay on his experience in jail is published.

1849

Book Published

Thoreau's first book, a memoir entitled *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers*, is published. The book is an account of an 1839-rafting trip he took with his late brother. The book fails to sell, and Thoreau is forced to buy back 700 unsold copies.

1850

Fugitive Slave Law

Congress passes the Fugitive Slave Law as part of the Compromise of 1850. This makes it a crime to assist escaping slaves. In defiance of the law, Thoreau hides escaping slaves at his family's Concord home.

1854

*Walden*

*Walden*, Thoreau's account of his time at the pond, is published. The memoir is a success and boosts Thoreau's reputation as a writer.

1856

Meets Walt Whitman

Thoreau meets the poet Walt Whitman, who gives him a copy of his book *Leaves of Grass*.

Oct 16, 1859

*A Plea for John Brown*

In an attempt to spark a slave rebellion, abolitionist John Brown leads a raid on a U.S. arsenal at Harpers Ferry, West Virginia. Brown is captured and later hanged. Thoreau writes a speech in his defense, *A Plea for Captain John Brown*, which is later published.

1861

Health Fails

Thoreau, who has struggled with tuberculosis since 1835, travels to Minnesota in the hopes of boosting his failing health. When that doesn't work, he returns to Concord and makes arrangements to have his book *The Maine Woods* published after his death. He visits Walden Pond, knowing that it will be the last time.

May 6, 1862

Thoreau Dies

Emerson's friend and colleague Henry David Thoreau dies at the age of 44 and is buried at Concord's Sleepy Hollow Cemetery in a casket covered with wildflowers. Emerson gives the eulogy at his funeral.